

VZCZCXRO0296
PP RUEHCN RUEHDT RUEHHM
DE RUEHCHI #0191/01 3540421
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P R 190421Z DEC 08
FM AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0921
INFO RUEHXS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI 0998

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHIANG MAI 000191

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PACOM FOR FPA
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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/17/2018
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SUBJECT: BURMESE MONKS' VIEWS ON BURMA'S INTERNAL SITUATION

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CLASSIFIED BY: Alex Barrasso, Chief, Pol/Econ, CG Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (d)

Summary and Comment

¶1. (C) Monks will not be the leading agents for change; the populace is waiting for Aung San Suu Kyi to come to power; the regime continues to keep close tabs on Buddhist clergy; the general public complains about worsening economic conditions; and monastic education is suffering, according to Burmese monks we met with on December 16 in Chiang Mai. Their comments highlighted for us the constriction of the operating environment for monks inside Burma since the events of September 2007. End Summary and Comment.

Political Change: Waiting for ASSK

¶2. (C) On December 16, Consulate staff met with a group of 12 Buddhist monks and two nuns from Burma, who are on the verge of completing a month-long training organized by the Community Development and Civic Empowerment (CDCE) program of Chiang Mai University. See para 12 for an explanation of the program and information on how monks are able to participate. This was a unique opportunity to talk with such a large number of monks at one time in a setting conducive to a free-flowing open discussion, which gave us a chance to hear their views on a variety of topics ranging from politics, to the economy, religion, the military, and education.

¶3. (C) The consensus was that monks themselves will not lead the next political uprising, and that there is no indication any events on the scale of the 2007 Saffron Revolution will take place anytime soon, though one monk admitted that "the spirit for change is there." Another countered that whenever you think about demonstrating, you have to also think about putting food on your table. Another observed that "the more you struggle, the deeper you sink," and that whenever you try to do something, "you will be targeted." Several expressed solidarity between older and younger monks, including on political issues, though they told us they often have to educate senior abbots about these issues before gaining their acquiescence with respect to particular activities.

¶4. (C) One monk asserted that the people are "waiting" for Aung San Suu Kyi to come to power, and that regardless, the current military regime "had to go," points with which none of the

others disagreed. Another noted that even government officials want change, but they too are afraid. We emphasized strong U.S. support for the freedom of all the Burmese people, particularly through our press statements, public diplomacy, high-level visits, and USG assistance. One monk commented that nine out of 10 people prayed for the U.S. to invade Burma when the Essex Battle Group was off the Burmese coast in the wake of Cyclone Nargis, to which we responded that a military solution to Burma's problems was not part of U.S. policy.

It's the Economy, Stupid!

15. (C) The monks told us that the amount of alms they receive is decreasing. People who used to donate \$160 a year now donate only a quarter of that. This includes factory owners and businessmen, who also feel the effects of worsening economic conditions, they said. Another said that nine out of 10 complain about the economy. When we asked who they blame for the situation, he said "it is not necessary to answer that question." A third added that people who normally provide consistent support to his monastery are now only donating one meal a day. A fourth chimed in that this year, it seemed like his monastery would be unable to organize the annual festival of offerings, or Katina, due to the economic situation.

Big Brother is Still Watching

16. (C) Though none of the monks admitted to suspecting the presence of regime "infiltrators" at their monasteries, they collectively highlighted close surveillance of their activities, particularly on politically significant anniversaries, such as of the Saffron Revolution. Even ordinarily, they expressed

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certainty that their monasteries are watched from nearby tea shops. On more significant dates, they shared that the surveillance is much more obvious, with military trucks blocking the monasteries in some cases. Phones also remain disconnected at many monasteries, they said, and those that have internet connections need to take extra security precautions. "Gtalk" and other internet chats, e-mail, hand-carrying messages, and the phone continue to serve as their main means of communication with other monasteries.

17. (C) One monk reported that before the Saffron Revolution, monks were given priority when it came to dealing with government offices, such as those handling public utilities. This is no longer the case, he said, while another monk lamented the lack of respect local authorities show them. They don't stand to greet us, and they ask us intrusive questions about our monasteries and our finances, he said. Others stated that local authorities are acting on orders from the regime in this regard, and because they are afraid of retribution for not carrying them out, they often are more repressive and disrespectful than the orders require them to be.

18. (C) Several monks also reported being interrogated at train and bus stations whenever they travel to Rangoon about the purpose of their trip. In 2007, Sangha Council members participated in the questioning. After the questioning, the monks said they are forced to sign a statement attesting to the veracity of their declared purpose before they are released. In order to avoid this harassment, they said that many monks get off inter-city transportation prior to arriving in Rangoon, and take local busses the rest of the way.

19. (C) A monastery receiving visitors is now required to report that activity to the authorities, according to the monks, even when those visitors are monks from other monasteries. They admitted that often times, they simply ignore this regulation. Similarly, they are required to report foreign visitors to the same authorities.

¶10. (C) There was general agreement that the authorities neither encourage nor support the social work of the monkhood. Two monks cited separate instances of local authorities interfering with their social activities. One occurred about 18 months ago in Rangoon when monks were distributing money donated by an unnamed American citizen to poor people in a local market with the assistance of members of the general public. The authorities ordered them to stop immediately, confiscated the money, and arrested a young lady who was participating in the distribution. She was released after one-night's detention and interrogation, but since then has refrained from participating in the monastery's charitable activities. Another occurred at a graduation ceremony for a monastery school, nearly leading to the arrest of one monk for not reporting the unexpected attendance at the event by a foreigner.

Difficulties with Monastic Education

¶11. (C) In response to questions from us about monastic education, the monks reported several problems. They cited inadequately qualified and poorly paid teachers as two key ones, and encouraged us to pursue teacher training opportunities. (Note: Aung Naing Oo of the Vahu Development Institute, who also teaches CDCE students for Chiang Mai University, told us that CDCE is planning a program on teacher training for monks in the near future.) The monks also suggested looking into ways we could augment the salaries of teachers at monastic schools. Younger students, they added, are generally not interested in religion and culture, leading many monasteries to incorporate language and computer skills into the curriculum in an effort to keep the students in school. One monk reported difficulties in recommending students to other monasteries, despite his close relationship with both the students and the monasteries in question. He commented that monasteries are now more reluctant to take in students with whom they do not have direct relationships.

Notes

¶12. (C) The monks we met with were from Mandalay, Sagaing, Rangoon, and Irrawaddy Divisions, as well as Mon State. According to the Vahu Development Institute, CDCE recruits the monks through contacts at monasteries inside Burma. A

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significant proportion are recruited based on recommendations from Paung Daw Oo Monastery in Mandalay, where one of the monks we met with resides, and which is known for its social activism.

The monks then apply for permission from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and for Thai student visas, ostensibly to study at Chiang Mai University. In fact, the monks only go to the university once or twice during their stay here in Thailand.

Their training takes place at a Thai temple north of Chiang Mai known for training Thai monks and the general public, mostly on agricultural issues. The current session, which ends on December 18, was attended by 30 monks, though only 12 and two nuns agreed to meet with us. On December 18, the monks will return to Burma to take up their work. They are involved in a wide range of projects, including HIV education, improving transportation infrastructure, schools, computer training, and running orphanages.

¶13. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassies Rangoon and Bangkok.
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